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IDEALS IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY¹

PERCY W. BIDWELL

A British writer recently commented on the "puzzling dualism" in statements of American foreign policy. He found lofty and generous professions of idealism uttered almost in the same breath with strident pronouncements on American military, naval and aerial power. Which is the true voice of America? What will be the direction of American policy in the perilous years to come? Will it give continuing support to the United Nations and its ancillary organizations? Will it actually participate in the promising new plans for constructive co-operation with other nations or will the United States, relying on its new-found military might and economic predominance, decide to "hoe its own row?" These are great questions. The answers are heavy with significance. I cannot answer them; I know no American who can. Perhaps I can help others to frame their own answers by commenting briefly on some of the changes in emphasis that are taking place in American thinking about foreign policy.

Let me begin by pointing out some of the contrasts between 1946 and 1919. Ten months after the Armistice that ended the first world war, Americans were feverishly debating whether or not they should enter the League of Nations. Now, ten months after V-J Day, the United States finds itself a charter member and one of the leading participants in the United Nations. My country has taken leadership in setting up the new International Monetary Fund, the Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization. It has taken the initiative in establishing an international organization for the regulation of air transport. Finally, and most important, the United States has proposed a plan for international control of the production of atomic energy and to prevent its destructive use in warfare. In the face of these facts it would seem unwise to predict that history will repeat itself and that, with the enemy defeated, Americans will again withdraw, leaving their Allies to wrestle with the problems of the peace.

Isolation versus international co-operation was for twenty years the issue at the heart of all discussions of American foreign policy. The Japanese put an end to that controversy at Pearl Harbor. If, after that disaster, there were any who still were confident of the ability of the United States to live in security, untroubled by the fear of attack, they were convinced of their error by the atomic bomb.

¹Address given at Chatham House on July 9, 1946.

But if isolationism is dead, some isolationists are still very much alive. They are changed, but not converted. New issues, not as clean-cut as the old, are emerging in the discussion of American foreign policy. In our thinking we are now in a transitional stage. For the first century and a quarter of our national history we had no positive or comprehensive ideas about foreign policy. Lord Bryce, writing as late as 1911 in his *American Commonwealth*, said he would mention the foreign policies of the United States only as the traveller did the snakes in Ireland, to note their absence. We had, indeed, two basic principles, a phrase from Washington's Farewell Address, warning against entangling alliances, and the Monroe Doctrine. Both of these principles were negative in their implications. They were interpreted to mean that the United States must keep out of European affairs, and Europe must keep out of America. In the Pacific, it is true, the beginnings of an active policy were evident as early as 1850. In 1867 we purchased Alaska, carrying the American flag to a point less than two hundred miles from the coast of Asia. But it was not until the war with Spain that the United States acquired the status of a world Power. At that time a handful of intellectuals, the first Roosevelt, Admiral Mahan and Henry Cabot Lodge, understood the significance of our acquisition of Hawaii and the Philippines, and heartily approved. But the bulk of Americans were not aware of the meaning of the new expansionist policy. "The Americans," wrote Lord Bryce, "drifted into dominion and were amazed to find whither they had drifted."

To many the war with Spain was a sort of junket and the taking of the Pacific Islands just another step in the long westward march of the American people. Old traditions die hard, and now, a half century after the Battle of Manila, having taken part meanwhile in two world wars, millions of Americans are only remotely interested in foreign affairs; millions more are only dimly conscious of the need for a positive foreign policy.

Over against this great body of indifference you may set that relatively small but nevertheless important group, writers, teachers in colleges and universities, statesmen, men of large affairs. This group understands the significance of the change that has come about in America's position in the world. They know and they say, some with deep humility and others not so humbly, that the United States having now become the greatest Power on earth, our action and, equally, our inaction is of desperate importance to all the world.

So far they agree, but when the discussion turns to how we should act agreement vanishes. Some, who for want of a better term might be called idealists, would act in accord with certain high principles and lofty aspirations. They speak in the language of Wilson and the Atlantic Charter. They talk about co-operation in the United Nations. Others, who call themselves realists, think and talk in more concrete terms. Holding that the only objective of American policy worth considering is national security, they are

more concerned with air and naval bases, with jet-propelled aircraft and guided missiles, and with the dangers of Russian expansion, than with the Four Freedoms and collective security.

In October 1945, on Navy Day, President Truman made a succinct statement of the goals of the American foreign policy. Since then he has twice repeated and re-emphasized them, in his annual message to Congress and in his Army Day address at Chicago. The President listed peace first. The United States, he said, renounced territorial expansion; it had no plans for aggression against any State. Moreover, the United States would not approve of aggression if practised by any other Power. The President laid emphasis on the sovereign equality of all nations, large and small. He said that Americans believed in the eventual return of sovereign rights and self-government to all peoples who have been deprived of them by force. In a qualified manner he indicated that his countrymen approved the grant of independent status to dependent peoples, at least to those who are prepared for self-government.

Americans believe in democracy as well as in independence. Peoples should be free internally as well as externally. To this end the United States will continue, the President said, to promote freedom of expression and freedom of religion throughout the peace-loving areas of the world. Americans had such faith in democracy that they would extend its blessings even to the Germans and the Japanese. Hence, they wanted to help the defeated enemy States to "establish peaceful governments." To make the job of promoting democracy complete, the United States would try to attain a world in which Nazism, fascism and military aggression could not exist.

The American goals of foreign policy, according to the President, are not exclusively political; we are interested in promoting freedom in trade and communication as well as freedom in government. Specifically, the President mentioned freedom of the seas, equal rights on boundary rivers and waterways that pass through more than one country. He repeated with approval the now familiar phrase of the Atlantic Charter, "access on equal terms to the trade and the raw materials of the world."

Taken altogether this is a comprehensive programme. But the President did not anticipate that the United States would accomplish all these great objectives single-handed. He admitted that the preservation of world peace required a United Nations Organization, ready to use force when necessary.

Professionals in the field of foreign affairs, and even some who have not been initiated into all the mysteries of this esoteric branch of human knowledge, have little difficulty in picking flaws in the summary of American policy as presented by the President. They point out rather obvious inconsistencies. They find it full of vague generalities and question-begging phrases. They bewail the lack of crisp, precise definition of objectives, the proclamation of what Americans will fight and die for in the field of foreign

policy. As nearly as I can judge, however, the average American would subscribe one hundred per cent to the President's speech. Its expression of lofty ideals together with its inconsistencies and evasions reflect Joe Doakes' sentiments of goodwill and tolerance. Its amateurish, naive qualities correspond to his lack of understanding of the practical difficulties of conducting foreign affairs according to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Above all the average American citizen has not reckoned the cost of his generous programme. He has not stopped to consider the sacrifices, not only in blood, sweat and tears, but in some of his own treasured ideals, which may be required if the United States is seriously to undertake to bring about the millenium in international relations. Take for example the ideal of self-government and democracy. This is something that Joe Doakes knows about by experience. He enjoys the excitement of a national election campaign, he is proud of being free to express his opinions on rival candidates and platforms. The results, when the returns are all in, often do not satisfy him, but on the whole he believes it is a good system, better than any other he ever heard about. If democracy is good for the United States, he argues, it must be equally good for the Roumanians and the Argentinians. Giving force to this homespun philosophy is the conviction that America, a strong, new country, enjoying the manifold blessings of liberty and prosperity, has a mission to perform, to redress the wrongs and alleviate the sufferings of less fortunate peoples. This is not a new development in American thought. More than a century ago Robert Breckonridge wrote that it was the mission of America to advance the moral elevation of the world, "to teach man to govern himself, to love his fellow . . . to teach the nations that all are equal . . . to reverence human rights, to raise up the down-trodden."¹

Americans who hold these views are rarely troubled by practical difficulties. They do not stop to consider how much they themselves have profited from traditions of self-government reaching back to Magna Carta, traditions not a part of the inheritance of the Latin-Americans nor the inhabitants of the Balkan States; nor do they remind themselves that democratic institutions in the United States, even after a hundred and fifty years of experience, are still far from perfect.

Furthermore, the idealists, if I may thus label them for convenience, do not fully appreciate that their objective of promoting democracy may conflict with another objective, namely the enjoyment of complete sovereignty by all States. Suppose for a moment that the Roumanians or the Argentinians do not want our type of democracy? Suppose they are so benighted as to prefer to live under a dictatorship of some sort? Americans since the days of Wilson, and long before that, have stood for self-determination. They have believed that people should live under governments of their own choice. Have they then the right to insist that all people, everywhere, shall choose democracy? Questions such as these are confusing, not only in America, I suspect,

¹Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943, p. 412).

to the mind of the average citizen, who wants his foreign policy stated in simple, direct terms. But in the process of his political education they are very necessary questions. For they reveal that a statement of foreign policy which runs principally in terms of lofty ideals is not sufficient as a guide to action.

This war has enormously stimulated the discussion of foreign affairs and foreign policy throughout the United States. In literally thousands of communities in the past few years millions of serious-minded citizens have attended public meetings where professors and State Department officials, and occasionally a Senator or Congressman, have described the agreements reached at Dumbarton Oaks and at Bretton Woods, or have argued the case for the United Nations or for world government. A few newspapers—not as many as one would wish—and a few first-class radio commentators are doing a good job in keeping the public informed and interested in foreign affairs.

To a certain extent the present flood of publicity on international affairs is reminiscent of 1918 and 1919 when President Wilson's plan for the League of Nations stirred the imagination and roused the enthusiasm of millions of his countrymen. But those who went through that experience make this comparison. They remark on the more sober and restrained tone of the discussions of 1945 and 1946. They note, often with disappointment, the lack, nowadays, of the messianic fervour that characterized the pro-League arguments of a quarter century ago. A calculating appraisal of the practical possibilities of collective security seems now to have replaced the former visions of the City of God. If these observations are correct, and I am inclined to accept them, they are, I believe, a reason for encouragement rather than for disappointment, because to my mind they indicate a hopeful transition in American thinking about foreign policy. They show that people in the United States in their dealings with foreign countries are beginning to be concerned less exclusively with aspirations and ideals and more with what practically can be accomplished.

Striking evidence of the new turn in thought appeared in the early years of the second world war, when the amazing success of Hitler's aggression policies awakened interest in the teachings of Haushofer and MacKinder. The geographers emerged suddenly as the architects of high policy, pushing aside the philosophers and political scientists who had long held the stage. Devotees of the new cult of geopolitics talked glibly of "heartlands" and "islands of the world." They bought maps in which the continents appeared in surrealistic distortions. They stared into their globes with the intensity and hopefulness of crystal-gazers. To those who did not accept the new gospel it seemed that even if Hitler failed to conquer the United States, Haushofer might.

The new realism has been given additional impetus, but fortunately a somewhat different direction, in the training programme for officers in the

United States Naval Reserve, which was set up in a number of American universities at the instance of the Navy Department. In this programme the prescribed course in "The Foundations of National Power" stresses physical resources and technological development, giving much less attention to the intangible factors of social psychology which determine a nation's willingness to use its power.

A statement of the creed of the new school of foreign policy might run something like this :

- (1) The primary objective of United States foreign policy is to promote the security and welfare of the people of the United States.
- (2) The United States is, and expects to remain, the dominant Power in the Western Hemisphere. We, working together with the other American republics when possible, but against any of them when necessary, will oppose the intervention of any non-American Power in the affairs of this Hemisphere.
- (3) We shall oppose, by force if necessary, the attempt of any Power to dominate Western Europe, or the area in Asia bordering on the Pacific Ocean north of the equator.

Those who profess this creed of blustering realism are not isolationists—far from it. They obviously intend that the United States shall take its part, and a very active and decisive part, in world affairs. But although in their talk about the American Century they seem to flaunt their nationalism, or imperialism, it would be unfair to accuse them of rejecting ideals altogether. They do not reject them, but they set them apart, distinguishing between "objectives," which have prior importance, and aspirations or things which the United States would like to achieve if it were practicable to do so.

The development of the new realism in American discussions of foreign policy indicates an increasing sense of responsibility in international relations. As long as Americans felt secure in their isolation and untrammelled by any obligation to participate in the affairs of the world, they were free to give advice to other countries and to enunciate general principles for the conduct of international relations. In this happy state of mind they were neither worried by the thought that their chickens might come home to roost, nor that they themselves might be called upon to put their well-advertised principles into practice. But now a large number of thoughtful Americans are aware that the United States can no longer escape the great responsibility that attends the possession of great power.

Thus, the critical question at present about American foreign policy is not, as in 1919, whether we shall take a hand in world affairs or whether we shall go isolationist. The question now is "How shall we use our power?" Shall we use it with moderation and with wisdom, in patient striving to make the United Nations a going concern, or shall we, backed by our surpassing economic power and the terrifying threat of atomic warfare, become imperial-

istic, attempting to force our policies on an unwilling world? Actually, the struggle between idealists and realists for the control of American foreign policy is not so sharply defined, but every day furnishes illustration of the basic conflict. Mr. Truman, in his Navy Day speech before stating his Twelve Point Programme, realistically laid great stress on the predominant power of the American Navy. At the San Francisco Conference the United States delegation took the lead in drafting the trusteeship provisions of the United Nations Charter. But now when it is suggested that any of the Pacific Islands which American forces wrested from the Japanese should be put under international control, the realists raise strenuous objection. Idealists would entrust to the United Nations all the secret processes of producing atomic bombs; realists would guard them jealously for national defence. In the continuing controversy over the treatment of Germany and Japan the clash is apparent between the advocates of moderation and those who would make unrestrained use of present power, not necessarily with a revengeful spirit, but impatiently, for the immediate accomplishment of short-run objectives.

Thus far I have not mentioned American relations with Russia which it is generally agreed present the supreme test of the wisdom of our policy. Of the critical importance of Russia in world affairs Americans of all sorts and conditions are keenly aware. At meetings at the Council on Foreign Relations, whatever may be the announced topic, the discussion sooner or later is sure to turn to the actions, or intentions, of the Soviet Union. In a recent tour of nine cities in which the Council has established corresponding committees, I found the same preoccupation with Russian policy. Thoughtful, well-informed Americans have worked out a middle-of-the-road attitude toward Russia that faces facts without sacrificing ideals. They recognize that much of the difficulty in dealing with Russia arises from an inheritance of mutual suspicion and distrust for which past policies of the United States and other western Powers have been largely responsible. But that is not the whole cause of our troubles, for even if we could wipe clean the slate of history, if we thoroughly understood the Russians and they us, there would still remain the fundamental differences between dictatorship and democracy, between communism and free enterprise. Some Americans hold that these differences must cause continual and increasingly bitter conflict, until the Russian system or ours rules the whole world. These people claim to be realists, but for the most part they are unwilling to accept the only realistic conclusion which can be deduced from their premises, which is immediate preparation for a third world war.

The majority of thoughtful Americans do not talk of inevitable conflict. They recognize Russia's power and ambitions. They do not minimize the clash of interests. But they do know there is not the slightest chance in the next ten years of mobilizing Americans to fight Russians. Hence, with more realism than the realists, they conclude that the only rational policy for the

United States is to find a *modus vivendi*. That does not mean appeasement, nor does it mean a blanket rejection of all Russian proposals, simply because they are Russian. It means rather establishing a scale of priority of American interests and objectives and saying "No" to the Russians only when we are convinced their policies actually threaten world peace and security. This group, moreover, would not be content with pursuing a purely negative policy towards Russia. It would attempt to enlist Russian participation in all constructive measures for scientific and cultural advance, and for economic and social betterment.

To attempt to portray the thinking of Americans on foreign affairs is an over-ambitious undertaking. In a population so varied, spread over such a vast territory, there are myriads of currents and counter-currents of opinion which defy attempts at description and evaluation. But it is evident that a great process of education in foreign affairs is now taking place. The presence of the headquarters of the United Nations in New York City in some degree makes it an American institution, entitled to its full measure of newspaper publicity and local pride. Popular magazines with a nation-wide circulation carry to literally millions of readers discussions of problems of foreign policy—what to do with the atomic bomb, the occupation of Germany, what to do about Russia, the British loan. Most of the articles are more objective, more temperate, and more informative than those which appeared in similar publications twenty-five years ago. On the radio the news of the world is broadcast in the home regularly every hour by several of the great national systems. In the movies, with the exception of one or two films, little has been accomplished, but this institution has great potentialities for bringing to the American people a truer appreciation of their new place in the world and their responsibility in international affairs.

In the colleges and universities, the undergraduates, and particularly the young veterans returning to complete their studies, are enrolling by the thousands in courses having to do with foreign policy. To meet this demand a number of the universities have organized new departments of study. Others, for example Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, have established Institutes or Schools dealing exclusively with international affairs. One notes, also, in visiting the universities and conferring with the teachers and scholars in this field, a new emphasis and a scientific approach to the problems of world affairs. The chatty conversationalists who had the news of the world at their tongues' end, and the exhorters full of enthusiasm for the bright new world, are now less prominent in college faculties. Their place is being taken by teachers, who want to know what makes nations tick, why they act as they do in their relations with others. This they recognize is a question for which there is no easy off-hand answer; it demands knowledge of geography and economics as well as politics and social psychology.

Although the trend in thinking and writing about foreign policy, both within the universities and outside, seems to be in the direction of greater realism, we should not conclude that American idealism will no longer be a powerful factor in world affairs. As a British editor recently remarked, "No nation is more firmly on the side of the angels in the long run."¹ But sometimes the long run has been distressingly long. It is a huge task to stir the interest of a hundred and forty million people, actively engaged in their own exciting affairs, in the fate of Iran or the Dodecanese Islands. Equally formidable is the job of furnishing them with pertinent information, and of arousing their will to action. But the task is not insurmountable; much has already been accomplished and important new undertakings are now in the planning stage. The goal of all such educational ventures will be to make Americans better informed about what is taking place outside their country, and to make them more competent to choose between conflicting views on policy. Thus, I believe, the inertia that now clogs American action will gradually be lifted and the "long run" will be shortened.

Meanwhile, we may look forward to a gradual integration of American thinking about foreign policy, with the result that the perplexing dualism which I have described will become less pronounced. Our practical experience in dealing with foreign countries in the United Nations will supplement our more formal education in international affairs. We shall learn by doing. In this process our idealists will have to set practical bounds to their aspirations, and our realists will discover that a foreign policy couched purely in terms of national interest and national power makes no effective appeal to the masses of the American people. For the springs of action, the motive forces which impel our democracy to great deeds are not the desire for greater national wealth or prestige, but the ethical and religious ideals that are a part of our common cultural heritage—human sympathy, freedom and justice.

¹*The Economist*, February 23, 1946.